

TECH&LEARNING



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Copy. Paste. Done. by Bob Sprinkle

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I saw a handout from a middle school teacher recently that had some really great information about searching on the Internet. It was given to the students to support the assignment of having the students research two different cultures and then report on the similarities and differences between the two cultures. Excellent stuff!

My understanding (from what I gleaned from the handout and what was related to me about the lesson) was that the teacher took the time to talk about the pitfalls and hurdles of searching on the Internet. The handout also had plenty of key tips on how to make a successful search: how to go "under the hood" and use Google's *advanced search* tools to refine the search; how to conduct a [Boolean Search](#); how to put keywords within quotation marks to have them appear together; etc. Wikipedia was mentioned in a fair and balanced light as a viable "starter" site for information which then needed to be further validated. All great stuff and essential skills for our students.

However, there was one part of the handout that stopped me cold. In a section that explained how to effectively use keywords in the search topic, there was the example of putting both cultures in as keywords (for example, *Rome* and *Greece*) and then also including the keyword:

"compare"

or

"contrast"

So, to be clear: students were encouraged to enter "*Rome... Greece... **compare***" or "*Rome... Greece... **contrast***" in order to research the similarities and differences between the two cultures.

Uh oh...

Let's break it down and see what would happen if a student put in one of the examples I gave above. When I put in "*Rome... Greek... **compare***" into Google, here's one of the top links I got back:

http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Compare_and_contrast_ancient_Rome_and_ancient_Greece_religion

Heading to that page, I see the work has already been done for me by the wizards at *WikiAnswers* (at least concerning the topic of religion):

Greeks worshiped many gods + goddesses. The Romans were polytheistic, and were often part of cults such as the the cult if [sic] Isis. Rome took the Greek gods and changed the names. Many Romans became Christians when Christianity came alive as a small sect of Judaism.

Copy. Paste. Done.

I applaud the teacher for conveying the importance of validating resources and ways to control the results of a search.

These are some of the essential skills needed to navigate the amount of information that will come back in a search result. Students need a lot of practice (from Elementary school onward) to be able to identify reliable, relevant, and useful information. But then they need to go beyond that. The next part of the lesson ---the one we've been teaching even before Search Engines--- is for students to *synthesize* and *make meaning* out of the information.

I fear the lesson and handout just encouraged the opposite line of thought: that the Search Engine can do all of the thinking for us. By putting in the words "compare" or "contrast" into the Search Engine, students are asking for a page to come back with all the thinking and meaning-making already done for them. This is only a step away from resorting back to what students were doing before learning about keywords and other effective search strategies--- directly asking the "Google-god" the question.

Example: Can you tell me what the similarities and differences between the Rome and Egyptian cultures are?

You think I'm exaggerating with that example? Far from it; I recently witnessed a 6th grade student enter almost that exact type of phrasing for a search query just last week. Did she get some hits? You bet. Did she demonstrate that she understands how to use a Search Engine? No, I'm afraid not.

But worse, if students are told they should use words "compare" and "contrast" in their keywords, then we've really missed the boat. We've just encouraged them to cheat. The "Copy-Paste Society" that we're trying to stamp out just got a little larger. We need to teach students to **find useful and reliable information that can be used** to do their own thinking with. The wonderful essence of what the lesson set out to do (have students make meaning --compare and contrast-- from information collected) has been handed over to the Search Engine.

As teachers, we need to make sure that we come up with assignments that can't be quickly answered by asking Google. This lesson definitely started in that direction by asking the students to find similarities between the two cultures. Even without "shooting itself in the foot" (and encouraging students to include "compare" or "contrast" as keywords), students might have found the easy way out on their own, and simply taken the ideas of someone else who's already made the comparison. Perhaps even one more step could have ensured that the work was entirely original, such as "Compare both cultures to the culture we have at our school" or "In what ways does our school culture resemble the Roman Culture/Greek Culture?" (something that is specific to the here and now, for instance).

In examining the described lesson, I thought about how the teaching of just 2 keywords brought that lesson down from a higher-order thinking exercise, to one that, in my opinion, could be accomplished with a simple copy and paste.

2 simple keywords.

It doesn't take much, I realize, and all week I've combing through my own lessons in my mind and lesson planner to see where I might have done the exact same thing and encouraged students to rely on the tool rather than do the thinking themselves.



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